Why Evil in the Father's World?
Job 21:1-16
Matthew 11:2-6
October 17, 1976

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John the Baptist found himself in one of those difficult and unexpected situations which call into question everything we believe, everything we try to live for, everything we thought we were willing to die for. A relatively short time before he had quite a following. Great crowds of people had come out to the edge of the Judean wilderness to hear him preach about God's righteous wrath and the eminent coming of the Kingdom. In Jesus of Nazareth John saw the end of the established order and the beginning of God's reign on earth. This was the one for whom his people had spent the centuries waiting. But now, from the acute perspective of a dark jail cell, John couldn't see that anything had changed much. The oppressors were still around: Jesus was a long way from altering the way life was lived. Injustice and cruelty were still the normative way of life. And worst of all, he, John, the herald, the first to recognize and announce the appearance of the Messiah, was in a precarious predicament. And so he sent messengers to ask Jesus a most understandable question: "Are you the one, or shall we look for another?"

That is a familiar dynamic. It is not difficult to believe in good times. But when tragedy strikes, when the firm footings of the good life show signs of crumbling, faith often fails as well. I have always found interesting the fact that church attendance seems to reflect that same dynamic. We assume that more people would go to church in a time of crisis such as war. Not so. The highest level of church attendance appears to be in peace time combined with economic prosperity. It is easier to believe in good times than in bad.

Robert McCracken reminisced about how it was before World War II. "We pleaded with him to manifest himself and defend the right; as the crisis deepened special days were set aside for intercessory prayer and the churches were crowded with men and women addressing earnest entreaties to the Most High. Yet the aggressor marched on. What wonder that some like H.G.Wells complained bitterly, 'He is an ever-absent help in time of trouble'." (Questions People Ask, p.37).

Where in the world is God when we need Him? It's a theological issue and a very important one. It is contained in the affirmation we make in the opening phrase of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty." What we mean by that is ordinarily that God is all-powerful, God is fair and kind and, most important of all, in control of events. That is how it is, by the way, in early Old Testament theology: if you are inclined to quote scripture indiscriminately you will have no difficulty at all in proving that God always punishes wickedness and rewards goodness. But if you are really interested in the evolving concept of God in the Old Testament, you will discover that quite early there were men courageous enough to see and to say that events did not always work out as neatly as theology claimed. As a matter of fact, wicked men didn't seem to be punished any more consistently than anyone else. Worse yet, good men seemed to be as trouble-prone as their not-so-good neighbors. I chose for my text the earliest articulation of the dilemma. Jeremiah the prophet had taken some rather strong and brave positions on the side of integrity and righteousness and justice. And instead of applauding his efforts a few of his countrymen concocted a plot to assassinate him. Whereupon the prophet asked God, "Why do the wicked prosper?" In fact, instead of glossing over this basic human question the Bible raises it over and over again. Psalm 35 - "How long, O Lord, wilt thou look on?" Psalm 82 - "How long will you judge unjustly,

and show partiality to the wicked?" Or John the Baptist, "How come I'm in prison?" which is what he really meant when he asked, "Are you the one?"

But nowhere in the Bible, perhaps nowhere in all of literature is the issue raised as sharply and relentlessly as in the story of Job. Job is poetry and not to be read as history. The poem is set in the celestial court of Heaven. God is very proud of Job, a prosperous man of "blameless and upright life". Satan, for the sake of conversation and debate, suggests that Job's faithfulness and goodness are tentative, that if he lost everything he had he would sing a different tune. Thus the story begins, the issue is joined.

One day a series of messengers came to Job to announce that bandits have stolen his oxen, asses, sheep and camels, that his servants have been slain, that in short - he now owns absolutely nothing. And even as Job is reeling under that crushing blow another messenger arrives to tell him about the wind storm which leveled his house killing his seven sons and three daughters.

"Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," said Job and all the while his entire body is breaking out in what is graphically described as "Loathesome sores". We see him, finally, totally humiliated, owning nothing - not even his dignity, sitting on a pile of ashes, scratching his sores.

Four friends came to him to commiserate and offer explanations of why Job has suffered so. God, his friends suggest, always blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. Therefore, the reason for the series of disasters will be evident just as soon as Job owns up to the terrible evil of which he is obviously guilty.

To his everlasting credit Job refuses to accept the traditional answer. He dismisses his friends abruptly: "As for you, you whitewash with lies; worthless physicians are you all." Job knows better: he has done nothing to deserve the total collapse of his life and the loss of everything he loved: perhaps a field or two or several sheep. But he has done nothing so atrocious as to warrant this total devastation.

After his wife contributes her advice, "Curse God and die," Job turns to his God with a very familiar question: "Why? What are the charges against me? Let me answer them. What could I have done to deserve this?"

One of the subtle twists of the story is at this point. Job doesn't curse God and die: he doesn't accept the answers of his well-meaning friends: he never doubts that God exists - which, we assume, is what Satan had in mind. Instead, he hurls an angry prayer into the heavens - "What are the charges against me?"

God responded to His angry man, but not with the answer he expected. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man. I will question you, and you shall declare to me...Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know..." Relentlessly the interrogation continues, "Have you commanded the morning...And caused the dawn to know its place? Have the gates of heaven been revealed to you? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this." (See Job 38).

The questioning ends, significantly, with Job saying, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful which I did not know. I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see Thee."

Here - at the lowest ebb, desperate, alone, ruined, empty-handed, and now chided by God for wanting only to know why it happened in the first place, Job established the only answer there is - God: God who somehow in the midst of this tragedy and its aftermath has become a personal reality and no longer a vague idea.

And the story ends like that. Job's wife returns, his fortune is restored, seven more sons and three daughters are on the way. They lived, apparently, happily ever after.

But the issue doesn't end that easily for us, does it? Innocent people continue to suffer, vigorous young men die of heart attacks, little children develop leukemia, on the very day I was preparing this sermon a Boeing 707 plowed into a school in Bolivia killing more than a hundred people, mostly students. The nearly universal expectation is that God the Father Almighty ought not to let that kind of thing happen.

In the prologue to Archibald MacLeish's JB, God and Satan are preparing the stage for the drama...

> God says, "Oh, there's always someone playing Job"
> Satan answers, "There must be thousands...millions
> and millions of mankind
> Burned, crushed, broken, mutilated
> Slaughtered, and for what...
> For walking around the world in the wrong skin,
> the wrong-shaped noses, eyelids:
> Sleeping the wrong night in the wrong city -
> London, Dresden, Hiroshima
> There never could have been so many
> Suffered more or less."

God the Father Almighty ought not to toy with lives of innocent people. If He can prevent suffering, why in the world doesn't He? "Why me? Why did you take her from me? Why did you let it happen? What are the charges against me? Why do the wicked prosper? Why am I sitting in jail if You're the Messiah?"

From every period in recorded history that question - which just may be the religious question - has been asked.

Gerald Manley Hopkins, the poet...

> "Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
> With Thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just,
> Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
> Disappointment all I endeavor end?"
>
> (Terrible Sonnets #50)

Jean Paul Satre, French Existentialist, is fascinated with the indiscriminate unfairness of life. He wrote a short story about a prisoner who concocted a wild tale in order to protect a friend from the police. In fact, he deliberately misled the authorities in order to give his friend the opportunity to escape. He made the decision to die for his friend when the police discovered his duplicity. The fabricated tale, by terrible coincidence, led the police to the very place his friend was hiding. Even when we make good and unselfish decisions, Satre was saying, evil intrudes. The late Albert Camus could not leave the issue alone. Good people end up suffering: evil

people prosper: there is no justice, no meaning to anything, life is absurd.

The German theologian and preacher, Thielicke, frames the issue in a way everyone of us has experienced: "We sometimes envision how our life should turn out, or how God should make it turn out if He is really God. But then something completely different happens. A job that suited us to a "T" goes to someone else; the cure for a disease is denied us. In the process we had secretely set up a chance for God to prove that He was the director of our life. But He didn't take advantage of the opportunity." (How to Believe Again, p.183).

We know a little bit about that. In one way or another each of us has experienced the terrible contradiction between our belief in God the Father Almighty and the brutal reality of evil and misfortune in life - sometimes our lives. We know what it means to stand in the void and wonder whether God exists after all, and if He does whether it really makes a bit of difference.

The Bible suggests - and we must proceed carefully here - that we address our complaints to God. The whole point of the Book of Job is that God is real enough to be addressed even in anger and resentment. Thomas John Carlisle writes: "If nothing else, Job gives us courage to remonstrate with our Creator. And our remonstrances need not be limited to polite pieties...They can be as boisterous and flagrant and monstrous as we feel the situation demands. And this because - as Job so constantly implies - there is someone to be addressed!" (Enquiry, Sept./Nov. 1973)

That's the ultimate resource of honest faith - a God real enough to get angry with: a God who is there with us in our darkest hour of doubt and despair.

In James Baldwin's Another Country, a young black man commits suicide by jumping off a bridge. His life was a mess and he had long ago lost all belief in God or man. One last thought flashes through his mind. "You wretch", he says to his lost God, "you almighty wretch, am I not your child too? Now, I'm coming to you!"

That's not very pretty: but Baldwin has captured the picture of a man in complete despair, who is still able to say "you" to God: a man who like everyone of us wants really to throw himself into the safety of the Father's care. What the Book of Job teaches is that even if all we can muster is anger toward God, we are not abandoned. And when you think about it in those terms it is not unlike another man, His life in shambles, His life ebbing away on a cross shouting, "My God, why?" And then finding the God He thought had forsaken Him: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." (See Helmut Thielicke, How to Believe Again, p.188).

Perhaps we are never closer to our God, perhaps we are never more authentically human, than when we ask "Why?" That is what Emerson meant, I think, in a perplexing little line:

"When half-gods go
The Gods arrive."

God has set us in a world in which accidents happen. He has made us to be free in the world - which means vulnerable. For our freedom also includes the risk of sickness, suffering, disappointment and death. He did not promise that His people would have it any easier than other people. What He has promised is that He

will be there: that He will be our God and our Father, to whom we can turn.

John asked Jesus "Are you the one?" which really meant, "Why am I in prison?" Jesus did not respond by way of a lecture on the nature of God. Instead, He said, "the blind receive sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear. That is to say, "It isn't what you expected, John. In fact, you aren't even seeing it. But I am in life with you. People are being helped and healed and set free."

God may not live up to our expectations. But the promise of faith is that He is in life with us, available to us, close to us in good times and in bad times. It is a promise that must be discovered personally. It can be discussed academically - but to no avail. Job,sitting on a heap of ashes - John, wallowing in his prison cell, didn't ask philosophic questions. Rather, they threw themselves into the darkness and found someone there. It was enough - and is enough. Amen.

Father, give us courage to trust when life threatens to tumble in. Give us the faith to know that nothing in life- or death - separates us from You. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.